

## Death and contentment in Virginia Woolf's war novels

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### Resumo:

Uma das características mais marcantes dos romances de Guerra de Virginia Woolf – *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) e *Passeio ao farol* (1927) – é o confronto da morte e da mortalidade nas estruturas do cotidiano (e das narrativas). A morte e a destruição – impulsionadas historicamente pela Primeira Guerra Mundial – rondam no pano de fundo, mas Woolf expande sua ficção para transformá-las numa reflexão sobre a mortalidade cuja profundidade e beleza rivalizam com Shakespeare e Montaigne. O impulso desses romances é mostrar como uma existência mortal pode bastar e esse trabalho é um breve estudo sobre como Woolf alcança esse objetivo.

**Palavras-chave:** Virginia Woolf, morte, modernismo

### Abstract:

One of the most striking characteristics of Virginia Woolf's war novels – *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) – is the confrontation of death and mortality in the fabric of everyday life (and of the narrative). Death and destruction – set forth historically by World War I – lurk in the background, but Woolf expands her fiction into a reflection on what it means to be mortal whose depth and beauty rival with Shakespeare and Montaigne. The thrust of these novels is to show the ways by which a mortal existence can be enough and this is a brief study of how Virginia Woolf manages to pull this off.

**Key-words:** Virginia Woolf, death, modernism.

In section XI of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Mrs. Ramsay is mending a brown stocking as she looks at the lighthouse across the bay through the window. She has strange thoughts of shrinking into herself, of loneliness and isolation, and perhaps of death. She is about to embark on what Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) called elsewhere "moments of vision", an instant of perception, a moment when the relations and qualities of things standing before you become clarified (DENBY, 1997). What crosses her mind during this moment of intense awareness is the thought of impermanence: "It will end, it will end", she thinks, adding perhaps in self-pity: "We are in the hands of the Lord" (WOOLF, 1981, p. 63). Of course there is no "Lord" in Virginia Woolf's fiction. Neither Mrs. Ramsay nor

Clarissa Dalloway, from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), believe in God. Mrs. Ramsay is annoyed by the insincerity of her thoughts and wonders how any Lord could have made such a world. However she is not depressed by the thought of a godless world. Staring again at the light, Mrs. Ramsay is flooded with delight as she becomes keenly aware of the intense, “exquisite” happiness she had known. And she thinks: “It is enough! It is enough!” (WOOLF, 1981, p. 65).

One could argue that in the novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf is in the business of showing how a mortal existence can be enough. Both novels are obsessed with the place of death and mortality in the economy of existence – they are haunted “by the specter of insufficiency” (FREEDMAN, 2003, p. 84). The unavoidable fact, Woolf intimates, is that individuals and civilizations die and they die conclusively. The pressing need to include death in the fabric of what Woolf elsewhere calls “modern fiction” prompted her to suggest, in a well-known passage from her diary, the altogether elision of the word novel to describe *To the Lighthouse*. The appropriate word, she writes, might be *elegy* (WOOLF, 1985b, p. 84). Thus the novels become assertions and acknowledgements of “the fleeting nature of human relationships and achievements” – they are acts of mourning (FRIEDMAN, 1995, p. 209). There is a great loss that is being sung here and that is the loss of the world and life that died in the First World War (1914-1918). The larger death is that of modernity as an idea capable of making meaning to people (BERMAN, 1986; BRADBURY, 2001; CALINESCU, 1987). The eerie empty house in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse* is the empty house of history. Death was inescapable. What could be done about that?

The idea that death is a necessity – that the only life is the life of the body and thus death is an integral part of what it means to be human –, was relatively common among the ancients. During the onset of modernity, in the Renaissance, the issue of mortality regained strength as well as fictional and philosophical currency, in varied writers such as Montaigne (1533-1592) and Shakespeare (1564-1616), to mention just a few. In his philosophical essay “That to study philosophy is to learn to die”, Montaigne quotes extensively from ancient writers such as Seneca, Horatio, Virgil and Cicero in order to bring home the point that, as he puts it, “the end of our race is

death, it is the necessary object of our aim” (MONTAIGNE, 1961, p. 160).<sup>1</sup> Since all death is certain, to disengage ourselves from the thought of it is a sort of negligence, Montaigne submits. Death is not an enemy that can be avoided. Montaigne suggests we should have death in our minds during the happiest moments of our existence because thus we set the remembrance of our mortality before our eyes. To find a place for death in our existence is the only way to avoid the misrepresentation of what a human life is about. Finally, to engage with our mortality is a form of freedom, as Montaigne puts it:

The premeditation of death is the premeditation of liberty; he, who has learned to die, has unlearned to serve. There is nothing of evil in life, for him who rightly comprehends that the privation of life is no evil: to know how to die, delivers us from all subjection and constraint (MONTAIGNE, 1961, p. 163).

Montaigne did not have the luxury of stating flatly that there is no God, but that is what he is saying indirectly in so many different ways in his essay. The awareness of our mortality frees us from the thought that someone or something might save us (from death). We don't have to submit ourselves to any transcendental authority. The rejection of transcendental (platonic) authority, as we know, was a major modern battle (ARENDT, 2003; CALINESCU, 1987). Once you take God out of the picture, death kicks in as inescapable. For that reason death looms large in Shakespeare's plays, and not only in his tragedies. Death is final for Shakespeare as well – a daring argument to be made during his and Montaigne's lifetime, when people could be executed for not believing in God and in the afterlife. True, Hamlet sees the ghost of his father, but that is not a sign of transcendence, but rather a dramatic device to show that something was wrong about his father's death. It had not been as it should have been (O'TOOLE, 2002). King Lear's problems derive from his arrogance and feelings of omnipotence, in the beginning of the play. He acts as if he could control everything, as if he were immortal. The tragedy is a long parade of the king's painful education on failure and impermanence. In many ways, *King Lear* is a story about the reconciliation “with the necessity of death” (FREUD, 1969, p. 379).

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<sup>1</sup> Although my source is Sergio Millet's Portuguese translation, published by Editora Globo in 1961, I am quoting from an English translation by Charles Cotton available in the net at [oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/montaigne/m-essays\\_contents.html](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/montaigne/m-essays_contents.html)

It is no wonder, then, that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf would conceptualize impermanence with the help of a Renaissance writer such as Shakespeare, specifically by quoting some lines from his comedy *Cymbeline* (1609), which appear and reappear throughout the novel: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun nor the furious winter’s rage”. These lines, from a funeral song in Shakespeare’s play (IV, ii), appear for the first time in the beginning of the novel, when Clarissa goes out to buy flowers for her party. She sees these lines in an open book in a bookstore window. The full quotation, which Woolf omits, is the following:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun  
Nor the furious winter’s rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages:  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney sweepers, come to dust (SHAKESPEARE, 1971, p. 800).

This is yet another line from Shakespeare about impermanence and the necessity of death, the great leveler. Mortality is not an issue that is under debate here. We remember Macbeth famously comparing the brevity of human life with the two-hour performance of an actor upon a stage (V, v). And “then [he] is heard no more” (SHAKESPEARE, 1987, p. 219), he adds, echoing Hamlet’s silence as all that remains from a life when it is over, which is like the nothingness King Lear is reduced to before he could learn to be a man. That meant, among other things, learning to accept mortality.

In Virginia Woolf’s novel, Shakespeare’s lines about the fear of death, or – as they really mean in both writers –, about the need to let go of our senseless fear of death, firstly appear during a stream of Clarissa’s thoughts when she comes to terms with her love for London and for the present moment, as well as her appreciation of the busy city life. She felt exhilarated by the enormity and extraordinariness of the spectacle of life unfolding before her eyes on that summer morning in Bond Street. The mere gesture of crossing the door step on her way to the flower shop had seemed to her like an adventure, like a “plunge”, prompting her to remember the joys and excitements of her younger days at Bourton, the family’s vacation retreat. In this moment of fulfillment she thinks about death, as if the extreme happiness she was experiencing – just like Mrs. Ramsay staring at the lighthouse – solicited thoughts of

finality and mortality. Clarissa did not resent that “this”, life, the here and now, “must go on without her” (p. 10). That is, the acceptance of mortality is a constitutive part of Clarissa’s and Mrs. Ramsay’s momentary feeling of sufficiency. It is a release, in Montaigne’s fashion. Clarissa was already feeling less afraid of death when she came across Shakespeare’s advice to “fear no more”.

Clarissa’s confidence about the beauty of life and the inevitability of death is shaken when she returns home after her walk to find out that Richard, her husband, had been invited to have lunch with Lady Bruton, but she had not. Again she feels as if she is about to plunge into mysterious waters but this time the waters were dark. Clarissa felt the dissipation of the early feeling of sufficiency and connectedness as she slowly climbed the stairs on her way to her room. Since her illness, we learn (something related to her heart), Richard thought she should sleep undisturbed and thus she slept alone, on a narrow bed, in an attic room. Her reaction is to invoke Shakespeare and tell herself, in silence, to fear no more the heat of the sun. This sudden feeling of inadequacy was no “vulgar jealousy” between husband and wife. What suddenly terrified Clarissa was time itself and ageing as she confronted what seemed to her “the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colors, salts, tones of existence (...)” (p. 28). She felt as if she had failed Richard and wonders if her relationship with other women, particularly with Sally Seton during her youthful years, had not been more fulfilling and satisfying.

The moment of vision – which is, as I have been arguing, the affirmation (if not the celebration) of impermanence – had been lost, but it could be regained. The consistent use of “marine images” as symbolic metaphors in *Mrs. Dalloway* (BROWER, 1986, p. 8) turns the novel into a liquid narrative that mimes the coming and going of the tides as well as the breaking of the waves on shore. The moments come and go. Happiness cannot last – so concludes Mrs. Ramsay –, but neither can grief. In her moment of hesitation, Clarissa felt as if “the icy claws” (of death?) had had the chance to fix in her (p. 34). For a moment the thought of death intimidated her, just like it would intimidate Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. In order to revert that and try to regain her confidence in the finite process of living, she again plunges “into the very heart of the moment” of that June morning. That plunge is enacted

symbolically by her mending of the green dress she would wear late that night at her party. Clarissa mends her dress and Mrs. Ramsay mends the brown stocking. They both knit things together, assemble people, fill the moment, amalgamate experiences into presentiments of meaning.

Clarissa's and Mrs. Ramsay's solitary moments of consciousness share the mending of torn fabric as an occasion to celebrate impermanence. Clarissa sat down in her living-room with her torn dress, needles and scissors. Her dress was green like the sea and she looked like a mermaid when she wore it. Fluidity, transience and impermanence are again celebrated by Clarissa's abandonment of her consciousness to the movements of the sea:

So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, that is all. Fear no more, says the heart, fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall (p. 37).

The surrender and quietness of the moment suggest, like in Mrs. Ramsay's stream of consciousness, the thought of death. Mrs. Ramsay's "It is enough" echoes the heart which says "that is all" and fears no more the heat of the sun and the passage of time. The progressive time that was typical of the nineteenth-century realist novel is replaced by a notion of circular time that does not go anywhere in particular, but only "renews, begins, collects, lets fall". Woolf incorporates a lesson from the First World War, which, in its brutality and unheard-of violence, reversed the idea of progress (FUSSEL, 1977). Meaning would no longer be placed on endings, achievements or culminations, but on processes. The future no longer had the privilege of solely holding meaning, but the present did.

In order for Clarissa Dalloway to regain her confidence in a finite existence, in life (her life) as a movement towards death, she had to reverse the momentary impression – after she hears about her exclusion from Lady Bruton's lunch – that the passage of time and growing old meant the "dwindling of life", as she puts it. The point that the novel makes is exactly the opposite, that the passage of time implies an enhancement of experience. That is what crosses Peter Walsh's mind after he paid a visit to Clarissa that morning and sees her for the first after some thirty years:

The compensation of growing old, Peter Walsh thought, coming out of Regent's Park, and holding his hat in his hand, was simply this: that the passions remain as strong as ever, but one has gained – at last! – the power which adds the supreme flavor to existence – the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly, in the light (p. 71).

Later in the day Peter would make the same comment with Sally Seton, in Clarissa's party:

When on was young, said Peter, one was too much excited to know people. Now that one was old, fifty-two to be precise (Sally was fifty-five, in body, she said, but her heart was like a girl's of twenty); now that one was mature then, said Peter, one could watch, one could understand, and one did not lose the power of feeling, he said. No, that is true, said Sally. She felt more deeply, more passionately, every year. It increased, he said, alas, perhaps, but one should be glad of it – it went on increasing in his experience (p. 171).

Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are about not the dwindling of life – despite the horrors and disasters of the First World War –, but about the possibilities of life's sufficiency, even as our lives define themselves as movements towards death.

Virginia Woolf explores this possibility by slowing time and expanding space (FREEDMAN, 2003). A huge amount of sensations, memories, impressions, fears and desires is squeezed into the twelve hours or so that pass by during *Mrs. Dalloway*. The spectrum of experience is expanded as sensual emphasis is placed “on certain objects or moments in order to suggest an immanent wonder in everyday life” (FREEDMAN, 2003, p. 96). The moments of vision are achieved by thoughts of death and mortality which trigger a fetishization of everyday life. It is only the awareness that “it will end” that unveils the wonders of the present moment in a finite existence. That is what Clarissa achieves once again at the end of the novel when she hears the news, in her party, of “the young man who had killed himself”. At first Clarissa takes death as an unwelcome intruder to her celebration. She leaves the party and goes to an empty room in the house. The presence of death is again elicited by the quietness and silence of the empty room. But things became clear and all of sudden “she had never been so happy” (p. 164). And the words came to her, “Fear no more the heat of the sun”. She had found a place for death in the economy of existence (and of the party).

In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf is making a strong argument in favor of the necessity of death. It is only through that awareness that Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay can see and feel the “immeasurable delight” (p. 164) of existence unfolding before their eyes. That is also the awareness – followed by the work of mourning – which allows Lily Briscoe, in *To the Lighthouse*, to finally have her vision and lay down her brush (as the author lays down her pen). That is the main fuel of the feeling of sufficiency and connectedness that, in both novels, amount to happiness. Septimus’s death is turned into an opportunity to affirm and celebrate mortality. Virginia Woolf, like her contemporary Freud, writes aiming at the idea that we should “make our lives hospitable to the passing of time and the inevitability of death, and yet to sustain an image of the world as a place to love” (PHILLIPS, 2000, p. 14). For that reason, the theme of the party, at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, is not only death but also resurrection (FRIEDMAN, 1995). Meaning is reclaimed and reaffirmed in the end by Clarissa’s consistent description as a bird-like figure with the propensity to fly. Yes, it will end, but it is the acceptance of impermanence that opens up the opportunity – like Clarissa when she hears of Septimus’ suicide – to “feel the beauty, to feel the fun”.

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